

**PDS is critical in Madhya Pradesh** The only livelihood source of 62-year-old Nanhiya Bai of village Pauri in Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh was her social security pension of Rs. 150/- per month, which too is received by her at intervals ranging from 4 to 5 months. Nanhiya Bai is an old widow and is the lone member in her family. As such, she is entitled to be a beneficiary under the schemes like Food Security Yojna and Antodaya Food Yojna, being run by the Government. Panchayat also treats her under below poverty line category. In this given situation, after a long struggle of 3 years, finally in the year 2001, Nanhiya Bai was able to receive her ration card under the Antodaya Yojna. This raised her hopes for meeting her food requirement and as such, will no longer remain hungry, because under this Ration Card, she was entitled to receive 35 Kgs. of rice and wheat at subsidized rates. However, her hopes were belied in the face of ground level reality. Despite her visiting the ration shop every month regularly, she was able to receive ration only for five times during the entire period of 48 months. There are 37,000 villages in Madhya Pradesh, which do not have a ration shop, and village Pauri is one of such villages. The Baiga Adivasis of this village had to travel about 10 kilometers, including a stretch of dense forest of Kanha National Park, to fetch their ration from village Titrahi, and most of the time, only to discover that ration shop is not open today. The old Nanhiya Bai is one of them. This is not true only for one ration shop of Madhya Pradesh and/or for Nanhiya Bai alone, but as per study conducted by the Planning Commission, it has been established that as many as 26 lakh poor families of Madhya Pradesh are deprived from the benefits of Public Distribution System which suppose to be a target based public welfare measure. Today, the biggest challenge before this world's largest ever food scheme i.e. Public Distribution System, is to face and counter the attempts on the parts of Government itself as well as by vested market interests, who are busy in finding ways and means to weaken the scheme with ultimate objective to get it buried. As per survey conducted by the Planning Commission, 42.43% of population of Madhya Pradesh is living below the poverty line and the numbers of poor families are 49.64 who are direct beneficiaries under the Public Distribution System itself. In addition, such beneficiaries are also entitled for subsidized ration under other schemes of the Government. In Madhya Pradesh, the total number of beneficiaries under the Anntyodaya Food Scheme is 15.81 lac-deprived people (AAY also includes 5.5 lac Poorest of the poor BPL Families), 55.52 hostel students and 49.64 lac poor families. By totaling it up, 60 lakh families in Madhya Pradesh are required to be distributed ration, as per prescribed norms, under the Centrally run Public Distribution System, at the rate of 35 Kgs. of ration per card per family. As such, a total of 25.43 lakh tons of ration is required to be distributed in Madhya Pradesh. However, as against existing 60 lakh beneficiary families, the Government of India is providing ration to State Government sufficient for only for 27.97 lakh families. This means that no ration is being provided for about 60% of beneficiary families and even out of so available ration, about 40% of which is being sold under corrupt practices. A very recent report of May 2006, submitted by the Planning Commission and a survey agency ORG -MARG, reveals that although there are 48.74 lakh ration shops for families below the poverty line, but ration is being issued only for 27.97 cardholders. In fact through this study, the Planning Commission made an attempt to prove that remaining card holders are bogus and do not require subsidized ration under Public Distribution System. It may not be out of place to mention here that earlier also, the World Bank, through its studies from time to time, attempted to prove that continuation of PDS is neither useful nor economically viable. The various analyses, based on public rights, have conclusively established that the expenditure of 42% of State's population is less than Rs. 11/- per day. As such, the obvious conclusion of such analysis is that at least so much of families are just not capable of purchasing wheat at the rate of Rs. 10per Kg. and rice at the rate of Rs. 15/- per Kg., available in the open market. In this given situation, the subsidized ration available from

ration shops is the only lifeline for such families. Although, on the one hand, it is true that more than 50% needs of people living below the poverty line in Madhya Pradesh are being met through public distribution system, but on the other hand, it is also equally true that by adopting impractical approach coupled with pressure from the vested interests of open market, efforts are being made to scuttle this public welfare measure of extreme social and human importance. In the context of Madhya Pradesh, it has been observed that in rural areas, ration shops, on an average, open for only 3 days in a month and even those 3 days are not certain. Therefore, the Government has to ensure that every ration shop remains open throughout the month and instead of ration shops for poor families, there should be Consumer Stores as was the earlier practice. Probing further, it is revealed that the main reason for not opening the ration shops on daily basis is that one group operates as many as 8 ration shops and that too only with one single handed operator/manager for such 8 shops. The reason for this may be due to lower rate of commission for running such ration shops i.e. Rs. 11/- per quintal on rice, Rs. 8/- per quintal on wheat and 24 paise per litre on kerosene. As such, it is not economically viable for such group to appoint separate Managers for each shop. Therefore, to make running of ration shops economically viable and profitable, unless there is at least 4 times increase over the rates of commission, it may not be possible to run such ration shops with honesty and without indulging into any mal-practice. Further, about 66% of villages are still out of network of ration shops and that is why people of about 37,000 villages still had to travel between 3 and 20 kilometers to fetch their ration. Thus, there is absolute need to increase the number of ration shops. And the operators of ration shops, under the targeted public distribution system, are not being provided with any working capital by the Government, in any manner whatsoever, to run and manage such shops. The need of the hour is to look at and make this targeted public distribution system applicable in a wider perspective. Because, presently its beneficiaries are only such families who are living at below the poverty line. However, the process and identification of 'Below Poverty Line' level is saddled with serious anomalies and consequently, majority of population remain non-eligible and as such, are deprived of its benefits. Hence it is necessary to bring every family within the fold of public distribution system. On one hand, the decentralization is being promoted in various parts of the country as well as in States, but still, on practical platform, the respective Panchayats and Gram Sabhas have not been empowered or authorized to operate ration shops in their respective villages. Instead of privatizing the operation of ration shops, the Women Organizations in the respective villages be allowed to operate and run the ration shops. The scheme has to be re-dedicated to people in its real sense. Basically, it is a public welfare measure, meant to provide much needed relief to poor people, but due to existing anomalies in the very definition of "Poverty" itself, most of its real beneficiaries are being deprived from taking its advantage. The Government also has to ensure for making this scheme as an economically viable venture. However, for achieving this, it is of utmost importance that instead of performing like a puppet show duly influenced and controlled by the forces of market, the Public Distribution Scheme itself be re-vitalized with firm political commitment for achieving its real objective. **Contributed by Sachin Kumar Jain**

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